

APPLICATION OF AN AGENT-TRAINING PHILOSOPHY

Speech Pathology Services in the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne

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During 1995, the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne established a student support service to provide assistance to students in Catholic primary and secondary schools across the Archdiocese of Melbourne. Visiting teacher services for students with a hearing impairment, vision impairment, physical disability or chronic health impairment were provided from February 1995 while psychology services commenced in April 1995. The speech pathology service commenced in July 1995. Each stream works within a multidisciplinary framework that also includes curriculum advisers (special education).

The establishment of the speech pathology service occurred at a time when there was limited data available on exact demand expectations. As such, schools were asked to refer students who they felt would require service support. The number of students referred was in excess of 3500. Following an extensive screening process, approximately 97% of the students referred were identified as requiring some level of support from the speech pathology service. This created the need to identify a service delivery model which ensured both qualitative intervention outcomes and effective access in terms of a minimal waiting period. Consideration of various models focused on the crucial role of the speech pathologist in

undertaking diagnostic assessments, determining intervention needs and designing intervention programs as well as implementing and monitoring the intervention process.

In addition to the role of the speech pathologist, an agent (e.g., parent, teacher's aide) was identified as a critical member of the intervention process. While the speech pathologist may conduct a session and provide direction, the ongoing practice that occurs between sessions along with the incidental support that an agent can provide were felt to be crucial variables. Given these views, the service model developed by the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne aims to support schools and empower agents to enhance communication and achieve desired learning outcomes for students with communication impairments. This is achieved either through direct service provision processes or through agent-training approaches in which the agent is skilled in implementing a specific package of therapy. As Dodd and Barker (1990) have noted, "it is not necessary to have an in-depth understanding of theory in order to implement planned therapy".

Training an agent to carry out activities with a student is not a new concept. The psychology research literature has widely documented the positive effects that agent-training programs have had on changing children's behaviours (e.g., Ferguson, 1985). The reading research literature has similarly documented favourable results in the use of parent-training programs to enhance children's reading skills. For example, Burns and Kondrick (1998) trained parents to administer a reading program with their children. Results indicated effective administration of the reading program by parents and significant improvements were recorded in children's reading skills.

Studies in the area of speech and language research have shown that training parents to administer a program with their child has a positive impact on communicative behaviours.

Eiserman, Weber and McCoun (1992) investigated the effects of a clinician-based treatment and a home parent-training program for children with moderate speech disorders. Results indicated that the parent-training group performed at least as well as the clinic-based group. Gibbard (1994) also found that a parent language-training group was equally as effective as individual speech and language therapy when working with language delayed children. Beveridge and Jerrams (1981) found that significant language gains were made when parents were trained in a group setting.

Research indicates that students' communication skills are enhanced significantly when trained in their own communication environments. Dodd and Barker (1990) commented on the potential effectiveness of training communication skills in naturalistic environments: "Agents can routinely monitor a child's productions, provide models and feedback, which speeds the remediation process and enhances generalisation to spontaneous speech in new environments". Training children in their own environment enables them to become effective communicators without the need to transfer their newly learnt skills from the clinic to home and school. The agent also has the capacity to practise activities more frequently in the student's natural communication environment.

Intervention for a student is based on the outcome of an assessment and the discussion between parent, class teacher and speech pathologist at the program support group meeting. The program support group identifies an agent and discusses the manner in which agent training will occur. Our service trains and supports agents to practise specific tasks and utilise strategies with students. As the students' communication partners, both parents and teachers have a significant role in supporting children's speech and language development in their daily communication environment. Training an agent occurs through either individual treatment sessions with both the agent and

student at the school, consultation with an agent at the school or through agent-training courses, depending on individual student needs. Ongoing support is provided through review meetings and consultation at the school. Flexibility is built into the service with a number of different service delivery options available in order to meet individual student needs and school processes.

The first step in the intervention phase of treatment, regardless of the service model to be implemented, is to identify an agent to work with the student. An agent is someone who is a competent English speaker and is able to read and write. If the parent is unable to be the agent, other possible sources of agents include: volunteers from the school or parish community, integration aides or special education teachers. Parents need to give permission if an alternative agent is to work with their child.

Once an agent is identified, the next step in the intervention phase is training the agent to implement a speech or language program with a student. The speech pathology service is aware that agents may require different levels of support during the training empowerment process to ensure effective implementation of the program and enhancement of skill development and learning outcomes. The speech pathology service aims to identify the types of factors that may impact on the effectiveness of the training process in an attempt to cater for these differences.

Service delivery options

School consultations

School consultations may be provided if no appropriate agent is available or in addition to agent training. These consultations aim to establish specific long- and short-term goals for the student. Curriculum planning and modification is also targeted through a program support group meeting or in discussion with the class teacher. Ongoing liaison with the school is established to monitor progress and provide support to enhance student learning outcomes.

Agent-training courses

Agent-training courses are offered for the implementation of language, articulation and fluency programs. A range of programs are available including:

specific articulation programs, an extended length utterance fluency program and language programs to target oral narrative, following instructions, phonological awareness and visual imagery to aid comprehension. Each program contains a number of structured tasks and extension activities to develop a targeted speech, fluency or language skill, and the aim of the agent-training course is to train an agent to implement a sequence of these activities with a student. Each activity in the program is demonstrated by the speech pathologist and practised in small groups during the course. Participants are encouraged to practise set activities during the week with the student and to discuss their experiences at the following session. Information linking program goals to classroom curriculum is provided to teachers. Following completion of the program, a review is organised with the agent and class teacher to monitor ongoing progress.

Individual consultation with agents

If an agent is unable to attend an agent-training course, an individual consult-

ation process is arranged at the school to discuss the implementation of an articulation, fluency or language program. Following the completion of the program, a review session to monitor progress is organised with the agent and class teacher.

Individual sessions with student and agent

Individual sessions for articulation, fluency or language may be offered to students and agents at the school. The agent is provided with practice activities and must attend each session with the speech pathologist. The focus of these sessions is to establish a home/school program for the agent to complete with the student. The number of sessions provided is determined by the level of support required to empower an agent to complete a program. A review session to monitor progress is organised with the agent and class teacher.

Intensive fluency programs

An intensive fluency program may be offered following individual sessions with the student and agent at the school. This program involves both the

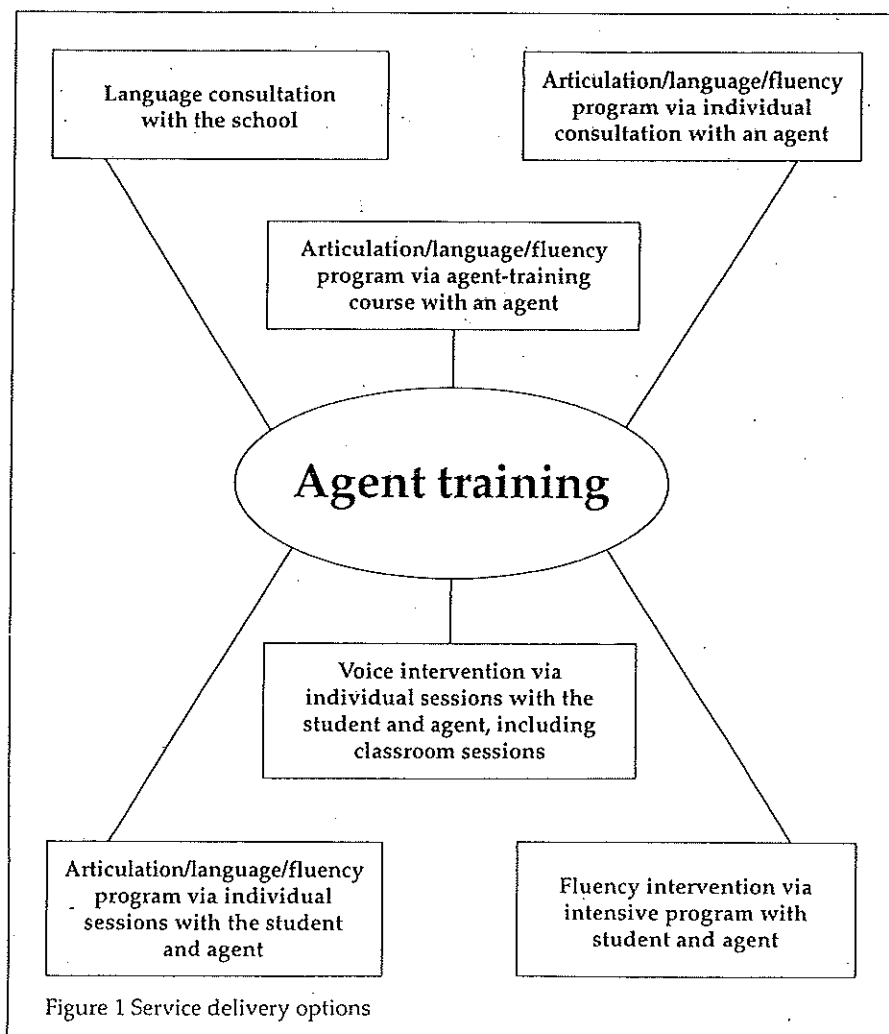


Figure 1 Service delivery options

student and agent. Regular maintenance sessions occur following the completion of the intensive fluency program with the student, agent, class members and teacher.

Voice intervention programs

A voice intervention program may be implemented through individual sessions with the student and agent at the school. Practice activities are provided and progress monitored. The focus of this approach is to establish a home/school program for the agent to complete with the student. Classroom sessions are also included to promote awareness and monitoring of voice use within the student's school environment. A review session to monitor progress is organised with the agent and class teacher.

Service delivery planning and provision

A speech pathology database has been established and maintained to facilitate service delivery planning and provision. Our range of service delivery options or "packages of service" are coded and quantified to enable:

- equity of service provision across a large geographical area;
- the establishment and monitoring of caseloads throughout each term;
- a record of service provision for every student referred;
- planning and administration for agent-training courses and
- accurate reporting of data to schools and management.

Service model evaluation and challenges for the future

Each student's progress is monitored by an evaluation of the impact of the intervention which is rated by the parent and teacher. Parents and teachers make the first rating at the feedback session where the initial assessment results are discussed. Ratings are also then made at each subsequent review session and appropriate program modifications are implemented.

In addition, a review of the support service was undertaken in both 1997 and 1998. This review has involved visiting a range of primary and secondary schools selected at random (55 schools in 1997, 45 schools in 1998) and interviewing principals, teachers and

parents with regard to their evaluation of the service and their recommendations for enhancements. In both reviews and across each of the participant samples, there has been strong support for maintenance of the current service model in the primary sector. In response to recommendations for service provision in the secondary sector, a number of group therapy programs are currently being trialled and initial feedback has been favourable.

A significant challenge of the agent-training approach is ensuring that each agent feels able to implement the specific set of activities. Identifying the indicators that allow us to predict levels of agent empowerment and therefore tailor the agent-training programs is an area of future research interest for us which is consistent with observations made by others (Ferguson, 1985; Dodd & Barker, 1990; Eiserman et al., 1992, 1995; Gibbard, 1994).

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